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# **LOOKOUT NETWORK**

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# The Road Home

## The Return of Bramley Mountain Fire Tower to the Summit

by Laurie Rankin

All roads must begin somewhere and in the case of the Bramley Mountain Fire Tower, **Past FFLA NYS Chapter Director Fred Knauf** starts us on the road. We thank Fred for sharing his diligent and thorough research.

“Bramley Mountain lies in the Town of Bovina in Delaware County. The mountain has an elevation of 2,815 feet making it rise over 1,300 feet above the West Branch of the Delaware River down below to the west of the mountain. In terms of its location, the mountain is 5.5 miles ENE of the Town of Delhi.

The Delaware River Valley has been home to farming for hundreds of years. Most of the farming has consisted of dairy farming and the associated greens that cattle and cows eat. Farming expanded along the slopes of the mountains along the valley, but for the most part never went all the way up to the summits for a number of reasons including the steepness, shallow soils, more harsh weather in the upper elevations and the fact that insurers charged much more for farm buildings erected so far from the primitive roads and highways of that time. Thus, summited areas remained under forest for the most part, as I show in an image from 1917 taken just south of Delhi.



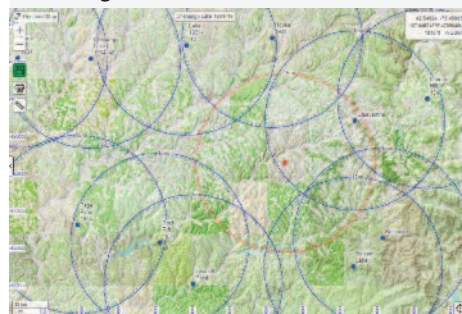
I'll not get into the history of the famous “Milk Strikes” of this region, but it should be known that there were times when creeks and perhaps even the Delaware branch ran white with milk. If that sort of history is in your wheelhouse, there are some interesting images and information out on the web in the county's and the local towns' historical association websites.

Bramley Mountain was given its name after the family that owned the property, and I didn't research just how far back that name was given, but by the 1880's the name was granted, and the Bramley family remained on the property that owned the summit. During the 1880's, the era of mountain top hotels in the Catskill and adjoining areas, Mr. Bramley was more than welcoming to allow visitors to climb his mountain for its view. He even planned on having a wooden observation tower

erected similar to the one atop Utsayantha Mountain up near Stamford, but I've never seen confirmation a tower was constructed. A cart path was cleared up to the summit from the east-southeast that followed the shoulder of the mountain heading up from the appropriately named Bramley Mountain Road. Newspaper reports from back in that time indicate as many as two hundred people would climb the mountain for its view each weekend.

During the initial phase of construction of the fire towers for the Catskill Park, no tower in the vicinity of Bramley was constructed, and the closest built were atop Belleayre and Balsam Lake Mountains, roughly 18 miles to the southeast. It wasn't until the State Conservation Department began the repurchase of abandoned farmlands and the establishment of the Civilian Conservation Corps that the fire tower system expanded north and northwest of the Catskills. That expansion, taking place from 1931 through 1936, added towers atop Utsayantha, Rock Rift and Gilbert Lakes, but left a sizeable gap between these and the other towers further away from Bramley, when one considers the Conservation Department's expected viewing radius of any tower at being 15 miles.

A study performed in the late 1930's that identified gaps in the system at that point and recommended new tower sites had to have seen the gap and looked for some resolution, but from the limited information I have from that report, it seems that a tower atop Bramley was not included. It wasn't until after World War II that the Conservation Department determined that a new tower funded from the War's Capital Construction Funds would be purchased and placed atop Bramley Mountain. It could be that Forest Rangers who were up on Bramley assisting in the search for a crashed Air



Force trainer plane in 1945 that had crashed near the summit, took in the view from the summit, and reported back to the District Ranger that the site would be optimal for a tower to “fill the gap”.

In early 1949, the District Forester, Milton Hick, contacted the landowners at the time and the Conservation Department was granted approval for the use of the summit, the construction of a fire tower and observer's cabin, and a significant upgrade to the road which would be used by both the Department, but also by the landowner. Agreements were signed and the Conservation Department placed the order to the Aermotor Company of Chicago for an eighty-foot LS-40 model fire tower to be delivered late in 1949 or early 1950. This tower was identical to a tower purchased that year for White's Hill.

Site construction began in the summer of 1949 as planned, but one significant hurdle had to be addressed and that was manpower. There was a shortage of labor with the post-war boom still underway and construction labor in the area was very limited, meaning that the responsibilities fell onto a team of Forest Rangers and Observers who pitched in during days of low fire danger. Those were Observer Jim Davies of Utsayantha Mountain and Forest Rangers Lester Rosa, Harry Williams, and Noel Gonyo.

First to be constructed was the telephone line up the road so that a telephone would be accessible should an emergency occur. After that, the workforce made improvements to the road so that the tower parts could be trucked up to the top and that took up most of the workdays in the fall. Footings and the threaded mounting rods were installed next, most likely after the spring fire season, and then in the late summer of 1950, the workforce began the actual steel build for the tower. The tower seems to have been built in the “old fashion way” with no cranes or other mechanical lifts other than a tie-on gin pole to assist in lifting up and assisting in steadying one piece of steel at a time as it was bolted into position.

By the end of September, the tower's structure and wooden landings and steps were completed and within a few days the windows of the observer's cab were installed. Technically, the tower



VIEWPOINT—Forest Ranger Harry Williams of Oneonta, left, points out distant landmarks to Delhi ranger Noel Guryo and James Davies, Mt. Ultrasantha Forest fire-tower observer, from the observation post of the new fire tower which the New York State Conservation Department employees have erected on Bramley Mountain near Bloomville.

could have opened then for the fall fire season, but the Conservation Department had failed to locate anyone who wanted to be appointed as an observer, and the last item necessary for an observer, his or her observer's ground cabin, had not been built. The workforce began that construction effort once the tower was completed and worked on it as weather conditions allowed through the fall, early winter and then they picked up that project in the spring of 1951 before the weather turned too dry. The observer's cabin was of the standard design employed by the Conservation Department since the 1940-era and is presently seen in its good condition on mountains like Arab, Hunter, Blue and even at Sugar Hill. The final work by the team was to construct a small parking area / loop and a day use area which included some picnic tables and a few fireplaces for picnic cooking.

By the beginning of June, the site was completed and ready for use, but even then, the Conservation Department was having no luck in finding anyone who wanted to climb and be in that tower so high all day. Thus, the tower sat idle all through 1951. The local Forest Ranger would drive up and check in on the property, assigned to Forest Fire Control, and not the Bureau of State Forests, and may have used the platform to scan the region for smoke. No formal observation or detection records were kept that year.

In 1952, a young woman by the name of Theresa Aitken heard of the need for an observer and was appointed the observer. I've not confirmed but I do believe that she was the daughter of the Bovina Fire Chief Floyd Aitken, and Ms. Aitken may not have spent nights in the cabin but rather traveled down the road and down to the home each evening. In the first year the tower was used, Ms. Aitken reported 2

fires and 44 visitors, making her duties rather lonely atop such a giant in the hills. Sadly, though, Ms. Aitken "moved on" and did not renew her duties atop Bramley in 1953.

Once again, the tower was left as a quiet and lonely place visited by few but respectful citizens. Once again the task of driving up and performing routine inspections fell to the Forest Ranger to add to their growing list, and that task remained on their listing until the end of the 1957 fire season. Happily, in the spring of 1958, a new observer was located and that one was somehow related to the first, as Mr. Charles Aitken from Andes, NY, was signed on as the observer.

Mr. Aitken seems to have been liked by those families and groups of Cub Scouts, Brownies, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and school children that visited the tower. Some groups camped around the picnic grounds and slowly the number of visitors rose to levels like what was occurring on Bramley back in the 1880's. I simply cannot imagine a school bus of the 1950's or early 1960's making the drive up and down that mountain road but apparently, they did just that. What a harrowing experience it must have been. If there are any readers of this out there that "enjoyed" that trip, I would love to hear of those tales.

The years from 1962 through 1964 were rather dry and tough fire years throughout the state. One particular fire that was initially reported from Bramley, called the Beaverkill Blaze, burned 200 acres in the Scudder Brook area beginning on October 15, 1964. That area is 19.6 miles southeast of Bramley and only 5.5 miles southwest of Balsam Lake's fire tower, but perhaps the observer at Balsam Lake was not on duty that day, as observers did get days off to resupply and refresh. That fire was fought by over 200 men, and it took weeks of November rain and snow to finally get the duff fire well underground declared officially out. 1964 was the busiest of all the years for Bramley Mountain with ten fires being reported from the tower.

As the 1960's concluded, the number of fires being reported remained rather low at one to two per year, and the number of visitors to the summit averaged only around 300 per season, this tower was a prime candidate to be included on the list of towers being closed to fund the new environmental branch of the Department of Environmental

Conservation, and so it was that at the end of the fall fire season in 1970, Observer Aitken signed off the Bramley Mountain tower for the last time.

Soon, the tower was removed from active listing and all the electrical components such as the two-way radio and telephone were removed. The tower's lower two levels of stairs were



(Bob Eckler photo, 1974)

removed as a precaution for injury as well. In 1975, the DEC declared the tower as surplus and placed it up for bid to be removed. It was purchased for the sum of \$50 by a local farmer named Peter Clark who thought it would be a great thing to have his own tower on his own property, but that work never went through and the tower remained in storage in one of his barns."

**Tom Clark, Tower Owner:** In 1975 Dad (Pete Clark) purchased the tower when he heard it was going to be removed. Tom's uncle spent a lot of time up there and they often took people up there to see the view. It was decided to offer the Conservation Department a bid of \$50.00. Pete won the bid and was required to remove the tower from the summit by a certain date. The plan was always to put the tower back up somewhere on the farm. While Tom was just a young boy when the tower had to come down, he did recall some things about that day. For one thing, it had to be that day as they had waited until the 11th hour to take it down. But the weather was not good. Torrential downpours and thunder and lightning went on all day. None the less, the Clark family; Pete, Tom's Uncle and Jeremy their hired man along with young Tom headed up. Tom spent most of his time in the Observer's cabin out of the weather. But the older men would take down a section of the tower, label it and then come into the cabin out of the weather until the next round of lighting passed. They repeated this process

until the entire tower was loaded on farm wagons. As they reached the base of the mountain and crossed the Delaware River bridge headed to the farm, they found the road flooded with water covering the road. They made it back to the farm and carefully stowed all of the tower; the stairs, the landing boards, the step boards, the nuts and bolts, the roof, the cab, even the map table.



Putting the tower back up on the farm never happened. The Clark Farm is a 5th generation farm established in 1907 by Tom's great grandfather. The liability of having the tower on the farm was something that neither the Clarks nor their insurance company wanted to risk. Over the years, they continued to store the tower and occasionally got offers from others to purchase it. One wanted it for a windmill, one for the center of a labyrinth, but they continued to hold on the tower hoping that one day it might be returned to where it came from.

While some parts had been left outside, most parts were carefully stored and stacked, all color coded and even with original graffiti!



When Tom heard about the new trails on Bramley Mountain and all of the popularity the trails saw, he reached out to the Catskill Mountain Club who had built the trails and offered the tower to them. As the Club worked on the possibility of the return home for the tower, Tom agreed to a 100 year lease to the County for a dollar. The Clark family did request that if for any reason



Tom Clark and Laurie  
(Bob Moses photo)

it ever had to come down, that it would once again be returned to the family farm. It means a lot to the family to see the tower go back up on the mountain. When they go

up on the hill on the farm, they can see the tower back where it belongs.

More of Fred's history - "The observer's cabin remained atop the mountain for another twenty years or so and was removed sometime near the turn of the century. I have no information on when, how or who was involved with that removal.



In 2008, the private property of the summit and access to Bramley Mountain was purchased by the New York City Department of Environmental Protection (NYC DEP), as they have done with much of the lands in and around the New York City's reservoir watershed systems. Shortly after this purchase, the Catskill Mountain Club approached the NYC DEP and the two planned out and constructed a nice circuit loop with a small parking area that approaches Bramley from the west (Glen Burnie Road)."

**Ann Roberti, President of the Friends of Bramley Mountain Fire Tower (FOBMFT)** takes us on the next section of the road back to Bramley Mountain's summit. She has been the driving force in getting the tower back home to the summit. The road was certainly winding and even involved some dead ends, but Ann never lost her passion for the project and her energy knew no bounds! I asked Ann how this all got started.

"Back in 2013 the Catskill Mountain Club began to work with NYC DEP to build a trail, The Shavertown Trail. It was a new venture for both the Club and the DEP. As both organizations worked in partnership to make this happen, to learn the requirements, and to understand the strengths of those involved, a good working relationship developed. Eventually more trails were built including the trails on Bramley Mountain. While working on the layout of the Bramley trail, someone mentioned that there was a rumor that the original tower was in a barn somewhere. The CMC thought it would be amazing if it could be put back up one day, but never really thought that was a possibility.

After the trail was open for a little

while, the Catskill Mountain Club received a call from Tom Clark offering the tower to the Club to put back up on the mountain. Ann reached out to Paul Lenz at the DEP and asked if they would ever consider the possibility of returning the tower to the summit. Paul made several inquiries within the DEP and eventually reported back to Ann that, Yes, they would consider it.

The Catskill Mountain Club decided that in order to take on the project, it would be best to organize a separate Friends of Bramley Mountain Group that was devoted entirely to returning the tower home."

And Ann, well, once Ann gets an idea, she takes action and stepped forward to be the lead on the project. "Ann made phone calls and talked to many people about fundraising, what she was most intimidated by in such a project. She organized a Board of Directors that came from a diverse group of local stakeholders, and she reached out to the FFLA for assistance. There was a lot to learn about local codes, about fire towers, about grant applications and Ann worked tirelessly on gathering information on all of these things to begin the actual project. With the assistance of a pro bono attorney, the group (FOBMFT) was able to organize as a 501(c)3 and work began in earnest on navigating the process of getting the tower home. <https://bramleymountainfiretower.org/about/>

As local leadership began to hear of the project, support grew. In 2019 the Town of Delhi passed a resolution to support the project. Local businesses such as Wayside Cider and Eighty Main stepped forward and held fund raisers to support the work of FOBMFT. Local businesses supported the project through donations as did many local individuals.

On the website they list Project Participants and each of these partners has contributed to the success of the project; The Catskill Mountain Club, the Clark Family, the NYS DEP, and the Delaware County Department of Economic Development.

Ann talks of the successes of the project and the highlight of seeing the cab going on the tower, but she is honest about some of the low points too. Hearing the Town of Delhi change their mind on supporting the project was devastating for her. But, Delaware County soon jumped in in their place. Red tape and construction delays have been difficult to deal with, but Ann is

persistent and the tower is home!

The project is not ending for Ann or FOBMFT. They have already created a Tower Steward program and trained more than 27 volunteer stewards who will meet and greet the public on weekends through the summer season, but you may meet one of them on a nice winter day too! Contingencies were made for ongoing maintenance, though steel stairs and landings will cut down on some of that maintenance. Funds have been raised and set aside in a maintenance account for any future needs including monies to take down the tower should it ever become necessary.

**DEP** – NYC DEP owns the land that the tower sits on. As the landowner, they have established rules and regulations that visitors must follow such as no camping on their lands. But their support has been unwavering from the original nod from Paul Lenz to the local Operations office in Downsville, who in the fall of 2023 took great care in prepping the site for the tower work in the spring. Small adjustments to the road way made access much easier and clearing of brush around the work site much safer. They also built a new, larger parking area.

**Mike Vileg, Contractor, Excelsior Towers:** Mike was first involved when FOBMFT were seeking estimates for removal of the tower should it ever become necessary. Mike has both taken down and put up 80-foot and 100-foot towers. But this one is historically significant in that it is the only one that has ever been returned to its original location. Job site access was interesting, up a steep 1.7 mile old log road to reach the summit. Getting the ladder lift up was an adventure. It needed to be a 4WD drive model and heavy duty enough to reach up 80 feet.



Material for footings, to go up the hill, 9/20/24



(FOBMFT photos)

The footings were poured, 9/24/24

Assistance from a bulldozer finally got it to the work site. The site was a very windy location this fall, but thankfully dry.



The tower was taking shape, 10/9/24



The tower showed above the treeline, 10/18/24



More parts and pieces awaiting a "lift", 10/18/24



(Ann Roberti photo)

Almost there!



(Ann Roberti photo)

The last roof panel!

Mike says the tower fit together as it was supposed to. He was very satisfied with how it had all gone

together and it was really a joy to work on a project with that outcome. Did you know that there are 48 bolts per side on the tower cab? Multiply that by 4 sides and that section of the tower alone has 192 bolts on it!

There were lots of items involved in the permitting process which took a considerable amount of time. Mike was very grateful for the site improvements which really helped him proceed with his work. For more information about Excelsior Towers or to contact Mike see <https://excelsiorfiretowers.com/>

**Delaware County:** When the Town of Delhi pivoted their support away from the project, Delaware County Economic Development stepped in to support FOBMFT in numerous ways. They saw the benefit to the local citizens and the local economy that this project would provide and gladly took on being the lessee for the tower and provided insurance. Glen Nealis, Director, and Lindsay Whitbeck of Delaware County Economic Development, have been extremely supportive of the work that FOBMFT did to bring this project forward; Glenn worked with the county Department of Public Works to obviate the need for a surety bond for the tower removal, and worked with FOBMFT on the intricacies of the permitting process, and more – help that was greatly appreciated. Two Delaware County Tourism grants have been very helpful in keeping the project moving forward.

Bramley Mountain Fire Tower is back home. Not a short or straight road to get it there, but it is home. The NYS Chapter is very grateful to all parties involved who made this happen!

